



Howard Yamamoto



The children of Keetley, Utah.

“It was hard on the parents. Was it hard on me? I don’t know, I don’t remember that much, the hardship. But the parents, my god. Could I do it? No. I couldn’t do it. I can’t imagine myself doing it.”

Out of the 120,000 Japanese Americans who were imprisoned in camps, 130 managed to escape the stark reality of mess hall food, barbed wire and guard towers, to live under a kind of conditional “freedom.” Four year old Howard Yamamoto was one of them. And though he was lucky to stay out of camp, the experience of fleeing incarceration was not without its hardships.

Fred Wada, a savvy businessman who worked in produce in Oakland, was adamant about leading a colony of Japanese Americans out of California. The best analogy for what he accomplished is akin to Noah’s Ark by gathering a group of people with specific talents he needed to build a community from scratch: bulk skilled farmers, carpenters, nurses, electricians, pharmacists, and plumbers. He scoured different counties and cities to resettle, finding it difficult to overcome the deeply-entrenched anti-Japanese sentiment that was rampant even in the neighboring states. It wasn’t until he met George Fisher, a landowner in Utah with 3,000 acres (much of it rocky and unsuitable for farming) that both men saw a mutually beneficial opportunity. While Wada could start his community on the land, Fisher would have complimentary labor to make the land fertile on Keetley farms.

Initially, the surrounding community from Summit and Wasatch counties were against the move-in. The city council urged Utah’s Governor Maw to keep the group from coming, while the people of nearby Heber City also complained. The backlash manifested itself in violence, too: someone threw dynamite towards a shed on the property.

Howard recalls his story from the beginning:

I'm just trying to gather my thoughts here. Basically when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, first of all, any of the minority, they were considered second class citizens. So, I mean this is just my thought. A lot of people have criticized our generation. Why didn't we fight it? Why didn't we protest? Well, when you're considered a small group — and another thing, Japanese just don't say *anything*.

It's not in the culture.

No. You know why this interest is up now? It's the Sanseis, third generation.

It's very different, the people who went through it versus people that are relatives hearing about it.

Our generation started because people like you were starting to pick up on it. It was kind of interesting, how much people knew about it. When I was taking a course at San Francisco State, it was something that had to do with social [studies]. I gave mine on the internment. The prof, well she was a visiting prof, she really didn't know what I was talking about. And she said, "What are these pictures here, the barracks? "They were in prison, essentially, behind barbed wires. "No!" A couple of the students go, "Oh yeah." But you could see it in her eyes. She was puzzled.

I'm sure she couldn't even conceive of it.

You just don't gather a hundred thousand people and put them away. Of course it wasn't really publicized. But anyway, it was interesting, this perception, of what happened during WWII.

When the war started, they were given a few months [to leave] I think we were given until February, March. I was four years old. Or just turned four. And what I remember most was my mother, panicking. She was panicking. And I remember the house we lived in, right in the middle was a potbelly stove. She burnt anything that had anything to do with Japanese like books,

records, pictures, any of that, she burnt. Because what was happening was a lot of her friends were being picked up.

Individually?

Individually. She'd say Mr. So-and-so got picked up or so-and-so got picked up, you know. And panicking. And for good reason. Because my father, before he came to U.S., he was in the Japanese Navy.

They'd have a target on him.

Yeah, he was in the Japanese navy. And he changed his name. So Yamamoto isn't my real name. It's Tanaguchi. Essentially, as far as I could figure out, he was an illegal. Which was very common, especially with the Chinese. Well, changing the names anyway is very common. Yamamoto was his aunt I think, who lived here in the United States. My mother was surprised as to why wasn't *he* picked up, if anything.



Howard's father, Masaru Yamamoto

He just flew under the radar.

He should have been one of them to go to Crystal City. But those that were sent to Crystal City were people who were in some organization. It may have been as innocent as a shigin [Japanese poetry] group and all that which the FBI deemed as being dangerous organizations. And at that time, the Japanese were pretty much isolated, somewhat. And a lot of it was self-isolation, by the way. They formed little clubs and so forth. And I think that's part of the reason they deemed certain organizations or certain clubs as dangerous or subversive.

I was surprised to see pictures of the people in Tule Lake. But there was a radical group and they were exercising. But they were in a military line, with the hachimaki.

My dad and Bob [Kaneko] remember being taught by Kibei who were

teaching them the same military style.

So in essence you did have some radicals in there. But I don't know much about Tule Lake. I don't know much about camp, for that matter.

Well on the flip side, a lot of people have no idea Keetley Farms existed and that there were people who were able to avoid camp.

I do not understand, or do not know why Mr. Wada took it upon himself to seek a place where he could essentially move his family.

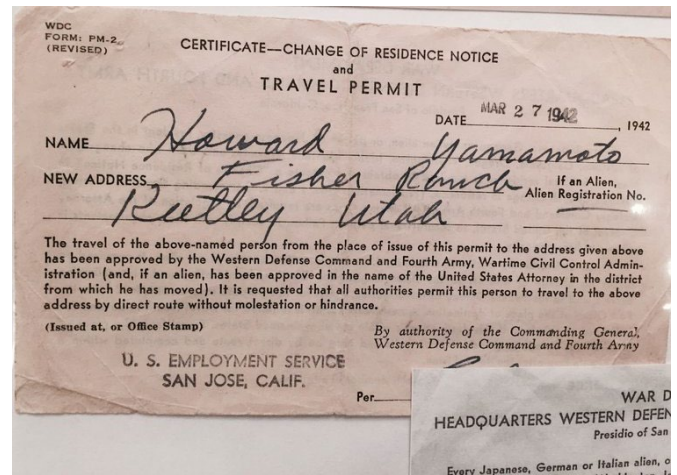
Because I don't think this order to voluntarily evacuate came up yet. I mean he went out way before that, just to look around. From what I understand he went to different areas like Nevada, a lot of places in Utah and such. And boom, denied.

They wouldn't take a resettlement community?

They just didn't want the Japanese. But when the word got out among the Japanese, that in fact he was out looking for a place to resettle, first his relatives wanted to jump. "You should take us." And then word got out further. "Would you take us?" He found a place in Keetley. And then he came back and his plan was to farm. But who do you choose to go out? So he picked them by occupations. Especially farmers. Now my father was picked—well, first they were good friends, good buddies. But he was initially picked because he was a carpenter. So as a carpenter, there's some use to the colony.

And how did they meet?

Wada was a big time produce man. He was pretty wealthy. And anyway, my dad worked for him for a while. And they come from the same prefecture in



Howard's travel permit to leave California

Japan, Wakayama. So that's how he got on. Wada himself has eighth grade education, that's it. When he undertook this voluntary evacuation, he was only 35. Can you imagine doing it?

Nope, not at all.

Yeah. His English is broken, broken English. And then having to go in front of the city council to plead with them to please let them in. Quite an undertaking, quite an undertaking, it took a lot of guts. And how he did it? I don't know. He had to go in front of the city council in Heber, which is right next to Keetely and convince the people to let us in with the owner of the ranch, George Fisher. They became real good friends and I guess Fisher and Fred really had to fight to get the city council to approve.

Fisher had something like 3,000 acres. It was an abandoned mining town. So he wanted Wada to come in but they had to really, really work their tails off just to convince them. Wada even had a talk with the governor of Utah, Maw. Somehow I think Maw got a hold of Fisher and they negotiated. Fred, I remember, in his later years, talked very highly of Fisher, he liked him. I would think part of the reason the people in Heber gave in was their religion, Mormon. Because the Mormons were under a lot of persecution. So I think they would understand.

How would you describe Mr. Wada's personality?

He was very self-confident. Just a very self-confident person. Wasn't among the Japanese, from what I understand, the most popular.

Really. He just rubbed people the wrong way?

In the Japanese group, you don't stand out, stay within the confines. I mean, *that* guy stood out. I remember when Mr. Wada attended my dad's funeral. And we spent some time at my mom's house. He's pretty gruff, but I love him. He says, "Goddamn Habo, [Howard's nickname] you wasted your life being a goddamn teacher. I could have made you into a successful businessman." And I say, "Oh okay! Why didn't you tell me that?"

“Glad I know now!”

Yeah, he had a really, very strong personality.

Well for someone like that, the prospect of being in prison is enough to make you want to get a group of people to try and keep your freedom. I understand that.

Yeah. This is the list of people who went to Keetley:

Names of original Keetley group:

- 1 Mr. Fred Wada (34 1/2)
- 2 Mrs. Masako Wada (28)
- 3 Grace (7 1/2)
- 4 Fred, Jr. (3 1/2)
- 5 Mary (1)
- 6 Miss Martha Wada
- 7 Mrs. Eiko Yamada (33)
- 8 Yoneko 12
- 9 Hisashi (10)
- 10 Kimiyo (6)
- 11 Hiroyo (4 1/2)
- 12 Mr. Nobukazu Tsujimoto (31 1/2)
- 13 Mrs. Toshiko Tsujimoto (28 1/2)
- 14 Dennis (3 1/2)
- 15 Stuart (1)
- 16 Mrs. Ei Tsujimoto (52)
- 17 Fred (30)
- 18 Ruth (28 1/2)
- 19 Masao (25)
- 20 Toyoko (21 1/2)
- 21 Mrs. Chiyo Tanaka
- 22 Gus (12 1/2)
- 23 Toshi (9)
- 24 Mr. Naokichi Tabata
- 25 Jack
- 26 Noboru
- 27 Matsuyo 18 1/2
- 28 Mr. Masaru Yamamoto
- 29 Mrs. Yukiye Yamamoto
- 30 Howard (4)
- 31 Katherine (4 mo.)
- 32 Mr. Kusumatsu Yamada
- 33 Mrs. Fusa Yamada
- 34 Yoshio 28
- 35 Tom 19
- 36 William 17 1/2
- 37 Mary
- 38 May
- 39 Fred
- 40 Roy 10
- 41 Mr. Denjuro Okamoto 43 1/2
- 42 Mrs. Rikiye Okamoto 41 1/2
- 43 Jim 21
- 44 Kazuko 18
- 45 Akira 15
- 46 Mr. Denjiro Okamoto 45
- 47 Mrs. Shizuko Takigawa 39
- 48 Kay 18
- 49 Bill (16)
- 50 Susan 15
- 51 Mitzi 13
- 52 Mr. George Takigawa (29)
- 53 Mrs. Toshiko Takigawa (26)
- 54 Gene (4 1/2)
- 55 Kaye (2)
- 56 David (5 mo.)
- 57 Mrs. Aki Takigawa (53)
- 58 Mr. Frank Sakino (21 1/2)
- 59 Mr. Harry Sakino (19)
- 60 Mr. Ichiro Endo
- 61 Mrs. Fumiye Endo
- 62 Taeko Jane (5 1/2)

- 63 Richard (4)
- 64 Kay (2)
- 65 Mr. Frank Endo
- 66 Mrs. Yoshiko Endo
- 67 Alice (4)
- 68 Tom (2)
- 69 Mr. Shibuya
- 70 Mr. Nobuzo Endo
- 71 Mrs. Michiye Endo
- 72 Jason (4)
- 73 Jerry (3)
- 74 Grace (2)
- 75 Mr. Hiroshi Endo
- 76 Mrs. Asako Endo
- 77 Mrs. Nao Endo
- 78 Goro
- 79 Roy
- 80 Miyo
- 81 Hichiro (15)
- 82 Mary
- 83 Hachiro (12)
- 84 Mrs. Mine Sugiyama
- 85 Mr. Kuzo Sugiyama
- 86 Mrs. Uta Sugiyama
- 87 Fumiko
- 88 Naoye
- 89 Misa
- 90 Hideo (15)
- 91 Sam (13)
- 92 Yoshio (4)
- 93 Mrs. Toki Iwamoto
- 94 Miyo
- 95 Chiyo
- 96 Mr. Bob Iwamoto
- 97 Mrs. Tomiko Iwamoto
- 98 Eddie (9)
- 99 June (5)
- 100 Henry (4)
- 101 Mrs. Sei Iwamoto
- 102 Takeo
- 103 Yae
- 104 Kiyo (16)
- 105 Teru (14)
- 106 Mr. Shunji Yamasaki
- 107 Mrs. Haruko Yamasaki
- 108 Tatsuo (4)
- 109 Mrs. Yoneko Furuya
- 110 Ritsuko (6)
- 111 Mikio (4)
- 112 Sei ji (2)
- 113 Nobuko (6 mo.)
- 114 Mr. Yasuhachi Nakashima
- 115 Mrs. Mon Nakashima
- 116 Masanobu
- 117 Chiyo
- 118 Mieko (14)
- 119 Mr. Senmatsu Honda
- 120 Mrs. Sumi Honda
- 121 Bill
- 122 Ben
- 123 Mr. Tsunesaburo Hayashi
- 124 Mr. Noboru Takahashi

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Do you remember if there was any convincing that Mr. Wada needed to do with your family?

No, that I have no idea.

To get back to the history, they were allowed to voluntarily leave California. And I think there was something like 10,000 permits given out. Out of that 10,000, only few made it. Not many. Some of what I read is that they were turned away at the border. Some others put in for a permit with the intention of leaving but changed their minds. Because where you going to go?

Unless you have a family or friend who was willing to take you who lived in the Midwest somewhere. Just to go out there blind, is, no. And also as far as travel is concerned, mobility was limited. Then, it was a two-lane road. And it was an arduous trip. Very few gas stations, very few motels and so forth. So, your mobility was pretty well limited for a lot of people. So the Wadas did a semi-caravan. They had a few trucks to carry some furniture, not a lot. I think each family was allowed to pick one or two. Because they only had about four trucks or something like that. And whatever you could take in your car. The rest you had to sell or store. So we did travel and as I remember, we never stayed at a motel. My mother was very apprehensive about going in and asking for a room. So on the trip there, I remember we slept in the car to Utah. And I remember she was very apprehensive about going into restaurants.

Because of the feeling against Japanese?

Yeah, being stared at. Well, she was almost paranoid. [laughs] When we did stop at a rest stop, we'd order a bunch of sandwiches to carry us through so she doesn't have to go to any other restaurants. But it was hard, it was *hard* on the parents. Was it hard on me? I don't know, I don't remember that much, the hardship. But the parents, my god. Could I do it? No. I couldn't do it. I can't imagine myself doing it.

I remember going to Keetley and it was really snowing, it was just covered in snow. I went back right after I got married.

So is it designated as a historical site?

You know what it is? It's underwater. It's a reservoir.

All of it now?

It's all under water. They made a lake. It's a valley, it's a depression and they flooded it. I don't know if they made a dam for power or what. But it's a lake.

When did that happen?

That happened, oh gosh, had to be twenty years ago. But anyway, yeah it's funny how I remember the store. There's one picture, where we lived. It was a big building and they turned that into a motel after we left. And I remember the guys who were up on top of the roof and throwing blocks of ice because it just built up. When we drove in, we had people, like an advance party that was there. And then we were all assigned to these rooms. We lived in there.

Howard shows the photos he took on his trip back to Keetley in 1988.

So where the families stayed was in a makeshift hotel?

Or if it was a big family, they went to some of these homes. We were spread out in the valley. Myself, we were in this motel and right next to the motel was a little house, little shed. And I remember later on, after a year we moved into the little shed. Individual house—I wouldn't even call it a house. I don't think it was bigger than the living room. And when we went back they stored snow equipment in there. I says, "Hey, this is where I lived!"

Initially whatever homes were there were abandoned at the time, it was empty. And what it was used for was to house miners. I think it was a silver mine there. It's only a few miles from Park City.

You know what's interesting is when the [Japanese American National Museum] first opened in Los Angeles, I mentioned it. "Do you have anything on Keetley?" They didn't know. I told them about it and if they've done anything about it, or added research on it I don't know. I think their main interests were camp. I don't know what they consider us, those who left California. I mean, is there a negative? I don't know.

I don't think so. Very little people know about it, so no one has an opinion about it. I think they'd see Wada as a visionary leader, maybe?

Yeah. After the war, in L.A., he got into city government. He was a Port Commissioner for L.A. He was very prominent with those that were in power. But anyway to get back to Keetley, when they got there, the snow melted and they were shocked. It was all rocks. So what they did is clear the rocks by hand, so to speak. They didn't use the whole 3,000 acres. It was just a small parcel of that land and they farmed it. What I never asked or talked about was, how did they split the money that they earned?

From selling the produce?

Yeah, I never knew. Fred was a super patriot. Well, he wanted to be seen as a super patriot for the U.S. I think there was a billboard sign saying "Farm for America." Here they are working for America and all that. So the negativism slowly dissipated. Are there a bunch of things that they ran into? You know, anti-Japanese? I'm sure. But being typical Japanese, they don't talk about it.



Food for Victory. Original caption reads: "A year ago these Utah fields were a mass of sagebrush. Thanks to Japanese Americans, they are now acres of vegetables."

My father mentioned it a couple of times. See, he couldn't work on the farm, he'd break out in rash or whatever. But he took a job on a railroad after Wada no longer needed his services there at Keetley. We still lived there but I remember him taking a job, I don't know if it was with the railroad and

he was turned away a lot. He mentioned a couple of times, a lot of discriminatory remarks made against him. But, he was just typical Japanese, he'd just laugh about it. It was quite an experience, it was quite an experience. My first song that I learned was "Jesus Loves Me," and that was by the Mormon missionaries who came to our settlement in Keetley.

In Salt Lake, I went to the elementary school, I think first and second grade. And to get on the good side with the teachers my mother used to give me things she got from camp to give to the teacher. Topaz at one point was under water in the past. So they would make these little pendants with seashells. Beautiful. And well, they had nothing else to do. So they would make these and I don't think they even sold them. They just made them. Some of my mother and father's friends would give it to them as a gift and then she in turn would say, "Hey, Habo, take this to the teacher." Oh and they were delighted. Also another thing, they would carve birds.

Oh, wooden birds?

Out of wood. Beautiful and it's a pendant. And I remember opening up my mother's drawer right after we moved here. Full of them. What happened to them? I don't know. What few there are left are in the Japanese American National Museum. I remember giving it to the teacher and they were so delighted.

And your dad knew the ultimate goal was to come back to California?

Oh yeah, that was his ultimate goal. Slowly after the war people started moving out. And that in itself was traumatic. A lot of them came back to their home and it was pretty trashed. A lot of furniture and things that they had their neighbors hold onto were gone. Automobiles sold and everything.

When we left Salt Lake, we moved to Stockton. And my dad opened up a Japanese restaurant there. As far as my parents getting back on their feet, it was easier because they had a restaurant, my father was a cook. And owning a fairly successful restaurant although it was small, was lucrative for them. But it was at a time when everyone started filtering back into California. We lived right in the so-called J-Town of Stockton and our restaurant was a block away from the Buddhist Church. Our sleeping quarters were in the basement of the restaurant. And we had no shower. So I remember we paid a dime or nickel to take a shower at the Buddhist Church. They had a building there, it was like a hostel. So we could take a shower there.

But what was vivid is they had a basketball gymnasium. And people who were returning from the camp all lived in the gym. So all you had is blankets I remember, separating the families until they could find a



Howard (age 3) and his parents, Masaru and Yukiye. Howard's mother was deeply affected by what she saw happening in the camps: A lack of decency and dignity for people who once lived autonomously. Howard recalls that his family visited the camp in Utah, Topaz, and were invited to eat a meal in the mess hall. His mother broke down and cried when she saw people standing in line with trays to eat.

permanent home. *That* is really vivid.

Do you remember anything when you came back to California and you started to go to school?

Did I face any discriminatory experience? Not that I know of. If I did, I didn't know what was going on. Elementary school, junior high, it was mixed, beautiful. High school, you start pulling away. I don't know if your dad ever talked about it but in the cafeteria, you had your little Japantown. All the Japanese sitting at this particular corner and eat. All the African Americans and Mexicans, you know. The white students, they had a fraternity type of thing, clubs. Of course we were excluded and we knew that. So we pretty much stuck to ourselves. Except for the guys as far as sports is concerned. So they'd mix there, but socially not much. Now you go to dances and you rarely see, I don't think I've ever seen a Japanese dance with a white girl. I don't think I've ever. One, they would look at the girl: "Who is *she*?" And the Japanese would look at the guy and say, "Who does he think *he* is?"

When did Mr. Wada pass away?

Had to have been 14 years ago, maybe 15? I went to see him. They moved him down into the dining room. They made a bed in there. I think he was dying of cancer. And he's laying in bed. I took my son with me to visit him. He says, "Dad I can't believe it." I says, what? "He has an ashtray on his chest." He was a chain smoker and even at that time he was just smoking away and hey, at that point, why not? And anyway he said, "Hey, Habo! You come to see a dying man, huh?" I was like, "Ah stop, c'mon, Mr. Wada." But I have the utmost respect for him, for what he did. Could I have gotten along with him? I don't know. I didn't know him that well.

So you think you stayed as close as you were because of your dad's friendship with him?

Yep, It was dad's friendship, really.